



NOTEBOOKS FAQ

Q Many notebooks are supplied with gloss finish displays. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this?

A Sony started the trend for glossy screens with its X-Black displays, or X-Brite as they are also known. Other manufacturers followed, and they are now quite common.

These displays have richer saturated colours, a noticeable increase in contrast and they appear brighter. Images look lush and more vibrant than they do on equivalent non-gloss displays, which makes them good for viewing movies. The downside is that gloss displays reflect more light than standard screens. This is particularly noticeable under the fluorescent lights in many offices, but any strong light source can cause a problem. This is why gloss displays are mainly seen on consumer rather than business models.

When buying a notebook, the underlying quality of the panel is a greater issue than its surface, and the existence of a gloss finish does not inherently imply quality.

Q I'm thinking of buying a notebook computer. What advantages does a widescreen display have?

A Widescreen displays have become common on the slicker consumer laptops. Widescreen notebooks usually have a 16:10 aspect ratio rather than the 5:4 ratio of a regular display. This means it has 16 pixels horizontally for every 10 pixels vertically.

The key advantage is for watching widescreen movies on DVD: the screen matches the movie's 16:9 image better and can display it without black bands at the top and bottom of the screen to make it fit. All TV and video files are moving to 16:9 as part of the agreed High-Definition video format. Beyond movies, though, widescreen is a point of contention. Some people prefer the shape, as the greater width makes it easier to use multiple applications in Windows. Others point to the reduced height of the screen, which is a limiting factor when dealing with documents that scroll vertically, such as Word documents and most websites.

We would recommend widescreen laptops for home use, where media playback is a factor, but standard displays are better for office work.

seth@computershopper.co.uk



REVIEW NOTEBOOK PC

SONY Vaio VGN-S4M/S

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £1,061 inc VAT

SUPPLIER Savastore 08716 661616

DETAILS www.sony.co.uk

If you thought you had to pay through the nose for style and performance, Sony is happy to prove you wrong with its Vaio VGN-S4M/S. At just over £1,000, it is surprisingly affordable for such an attractive and slim notebook.

The high build quality and superior design are obvious as soon as you pick it up: the grey metallic lid is tastefully branded with a large Vaio logo and opens without a catch, as the tough hinges hold it shut. At just 2.1kg, this notebook is also light enough to carry around all day without giving yourself unnecessary strain.

When we opened the screen, the first thing we noticed was the minimalist layout. There are no unnecessary logos or excessive short cut buttons. The keyboard is satisfying to the touch, doesn't flex under pressure and provides good feedback. The touch pad is of similar quality and is responsive to use. There are two dinky programmable short cut buttons above the keyboard. Below and to the left is a row of indicators for the usual factors, battery, mains power and wireless connection. There is also a little switch that deactivates the wireless connection completely, which is useful for plane journeys or just to conserve battery life.

The 13.3" widescreen has a 1,280x800 resolution. Colours and contrast are improved by its



gloss finish, but this also causes greater reflections on the screen. It passed our display tests, and greyscales were particularly smooth. It's a great screen for watching movies, and the notebook comes with WinDVD 5 installed.

Application performance was decent in the *Shopper* benchmarks. The notebook will handle day-to-day tasks with ease, but those who want to manipulate photos or edit video should look for something more powerful. It lasted a respectable 197 minutes in our light battery use test.

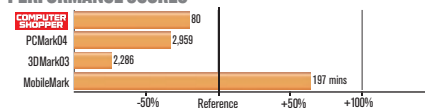
3D performance isn't bad for a notebook, and it should cope with less demanding games. We trimmed our usual Doom 3 test down to 800x600 at medium resolution and got a playable frame rate of 29.8fps. It's fine for new games at lower resolutions, too.

This lovely looking notebook has its downsides, though. It has only two USB2 ports, so if you use an external mouse and keyboard you're out of ports already. The base also gets hot with prolonged use.

Overall, the VGN-S4M/S is a well-designed and portable notebook, and is a reasonable price for its size. It is an excellent choice for anyone who wants a notebook that's easy to carry around but can also turn its hand to entertainment.

Seth Barton

PERFORMANCE SCORES



✓ Great build quality; excellent gloss widescreen

✗ Only two USB2 ports; gets hot underneath

SPECIFICATIONS 1.6GHz Intel Pentium M 730, 512MB RAM, 60GB hard disk, nVidia GeForce Go 6200 TurboCache graphics, DVD+/-RW +DL drive, 13.3" LCD screen. **Part code** VGN-S4M/S

HOTLIST NOTEBOOK PC

ACER Ferrari 4005 WLMi

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £1,199 inc VAT

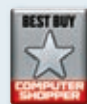
SUPPLIER www.acernotebooks.co.uk

DETAILS www.acer.co.uk

The latest notebook in Acer's Ferrari range has more tasteful styling than its previous gaudy efforts. What's more, it's a slim and well-built notebook with impressive 2D and 3D performance.

It is crammed with features such as a double-layer DVD writer and built-in Bluetooth, and it has a huge 100GB hard disk and a gigabyte of RAM.

The soft rubber keyboard surround makes typing very comfortable and the high-resolution screen has excellent contrast and colour saturation. The 4005 WLMi is also good



value, showing that Acer is not charging over the odds for the Ferrari branding, despite the carbon-fibre lid.

SPECIFICATIONS 2.0GHz AMD Turion 64 ML-37, 1GB RAM, 100GB hard disk, ATI Mobility Radeon X700 graphics, DVD+/-RW DL, 1,680x1,050 widescreen LCD, weighs 3.05kg. **Part code** LX.FR406.034

REVIEW **TABLET PC**

DIALOGUE FLYBOOK

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £1,399 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.laptopsuperstore.co.uk,

08700 273 466
DETAILS www.dialogue.com.tw

Dialogue's FlyBook is impressively small. Weighing just 1.2kg and occupying about the same amount of desk space as an A5 diary, it's so small and light that you could slip it in to a bag and carry it around all day without even noticing it.

Despite being about as small as a notebook can be, it still has the flexibility and power of a full Windows XP operating system. It can run all your standard applications, so it's an attractive choice for those who want more power than a PDA can offer but don't want the weight of a regular notebook.

The small size owes a lot to the choice of processor. By forsaking AMD and Intel in favour of Transmeta's 1GHz Crusoe TM-5800, Dialogue has been able to use a much smaller chassis, as the processor generates much less heat. Sadly, it's also a lot less powerful. Even with 512MB RAM, its score in *Shopper's* application benchmarks was the worst we've ever seen. This score seems a little harsh, though, as the notebook is fine for word processing, email and internet use. Just don't expect to be able to edit your photos with it.

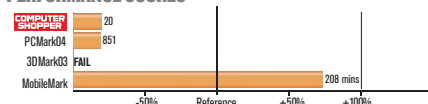
Power isn't the only problem. Dialogue has squeezed a full keyboard into the notebook's tiny chassis. As each key is around half the size of a regular notebook key, we couldn't touch type and

had to put in lots of practice to reach an acceptable speed. There's a track point in the top right-hand corner with the buttons on the top left. It works acceptably, but reaching up to it from the keyboard is a nuisance. The FlyBook also has a touch screen, but it doesn't use Windows XP Tablet Edition – and suffers for it. The FlyBook offers some of the same functions, such as handwriting recognition, but we found it inaccurate and confusing.

The 8.9" widescreen display is also grainy as a result of the touch screen. This is a shame, as it has a decent 1,024x600 resolution and performed well in our greyscale and colour tests. It won't win any awards, but the mild banding and slightly muted colours were nothing to get upset about.

But it's not all bad news. The 40GB hard disk provides lots of space even after you have installed Windows and your applications. The battery lasts a respectable 208 minutes with light use. It has plenty of ports and expansion slots: two USB2, two FireWire, Ethernet, modem and PC Card are present.

The FlyBook's size is certainly attractive, but it's not a very powerful notebook and has poor tablet features. You could spend the same money on a good ultra-portable notebook instead.

Seth Barton
PERFORMANCE SCORES

 **Very small; runs windows XP**
 **Poor tablet implementation; expensive**

SPECIFICATIONS 1GHz Transmeta Crusoe TM-5800, 512MB RAM, 40GB hard disk, 16MB ATI Radeon mobility graphics, 8.9" LCD screen, weighs 1.2kg. **Part code** A33ig-blu-xph

HOTLIST **NOTEBOOK PC**

ELONEX Prowire 121B

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £956 inc VAT

SUPPLIER [Elonex 08707 801010](http://www.elonex.co.uk)
DETAILS www.elonex.co.uk

Elonex's Prowire 121B won a Best Buy award in our Labs test of ultra-portable notebooks in *Shopper* October 2005. It's stylish, slim and incredibly light, weighing just 1.5kg with the standard battery. Its 12.1" LCD is very bright and it comes with a generous 80GB hard disk.

The Prowire 121B offers performance as well as portability. Its 2GHz Intel Pentium M processor is fast enough for most Windows applications, and it even has sufficient power to handle processor-intensive tasks such as video editing. The notebook is supplied with three-cell and six-cell batteries, and while battery life with

the three-cell is poor, the six-cell battery provides more than four hours of computing and adds only 200g to the weight. This is a desirable and powerful notebook and is very good value.

SPECIFICATIONS 2GHz Intel Pentium M 755, 512MB RAM, 80GB hard disk, Intel 855GME integrated graphics, DVD/CD-RW, 12.1" LCD

BYTE SIZE!



Our round-up of the best new gadgets and software

AKASA AllInOne

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £30 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.eclipsecomputers.com
DETAILS www.akasa.com.tw

Once installed into a 5¼" drive bay, the AllInOne provides several functions including a memory card reader, convenient access to several ports that are normally beyond easy reach, and manual or automatic control over the speed of your processor's fan.

The catch is that installation can be a struggle, with 12 easily entangled cables that must be plugged carefully into the motherboard. The full-colour instruction booklet helps, but the cables could be labelled better. All the features work as expected, including the unusual but useful SATA socket, which enables you to connect an internal hard disk externally.

For those who need all these features and can endure the installation process, the AllInOne is a fine, space-saving choice.

Alan Lu

Alone In The Dark

RATING ★

PRICE £11

DETAILS www.dvd.co.uk

This adaptation of the well-established Atari title can be added to the long list of unsuccessful movies based on games. *Alone In The Dark* seems to have all the ingredients of a cult hit – brooding hero, mysterious artefacts, scary monsters – but director Uwe Boll manages to combine these elements into a stodgy mess of a horror thriller, with crashingly dull effects and plotlines that go nowhere. As supernatural investigator Edward Carnby, Christian Slater searches for the truth behind some spooky goings-on armed with little more than a blank look, while co-stars Tara Reid and Stephen Dorff look as if they're not quite sure where they are. Boll provides a manic commentary and the disc also includes a few routine featurettes.

Chris Miller

REVIEW **NOTEBOOK PC**

ASUS A6000

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £915 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.inmac.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.asus.com>

Asus describes the A6000 as an entertainment notebook, and it comes with a handful of excellent multimedia features.

This notebook is fairly large and its footprint is bigger than an issue of *Shopper*. At 3.1kg it's quite heavy, too; you could easily take it away with you for the weekend, but you wouldn't want to carry it about every day. The 15.4" widescreen display has a standard 1,280x800 resolution. We ran our usual image tests, and the A6000 responded beautifully. The colour test looked bright and vibrant and the colour transitions were smooth, although blacks looked washed out if the screen wasn't tilted to the correct viewing angle.

DVD playback was superb on the gloss widescreen display. ASUS includes its own DVD software, although a remote control would have been useful. The A6000 also has a built-in 1.3-megapixel webcam and a microphone, making it perfect for users of online chat programs.

You can use the notebook as a CD player without having to start Windows. Playback controls are built into the front, but you'll have to open the lid and use the keyboard to adjust the volume. Sound from the built-in speakers lacks bass and volume, so it's better to plug in an external set of speakers if you want to enjoy your music.

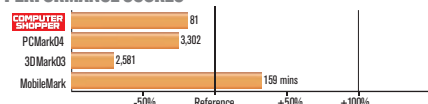


The A6000's application performance is impressive. In our *Shopper* benchmarks it scored 81 overall, which is easily good enough for day-to-day tasks such as using email and office applications. If you need to manipulate photos or video regularly, though, you would be better off with a more powerful machine. Its battery life of 159 minutes isn't great, but this notebook wasn't intended for mobile use. Some gaming is possible, as the A6000 managed a Doom 3 benchmark score of 30.6fps with medium detail at a resolution of 800x600.

The keyboard is spacious and the keys have plenty of travel, while the touch pad is large and accurate. A dinky Logitech USB mouse is also supplied. Four slim keys above the keyboard provide short cuts for email and web browsing. It has plenty of ports, with four USB2, serial and parallel legacy ports, an S-video out for watching on a large screen and an optical mini-jack S/PDIF interface for movie surround sound.

The 6000 is well designed and has some nicely thought-out extras. If you want a second computer for the home, or you need an entertaining machine for your studio flat, this should fit the bill.

Seth Barton

PERFORMANCE SCORES


✓ Great display; good layout; multimedia extras

✗ Heavy; no remote control

SPECIFICATIONS 1.73GHz Intel Pentium M 740, 512MB RAM, 60GB hard disk, 256MB nVidia GeForce Go 6200 turbo cache graphics, DVD+/-RW DL drives, 15.4" LCD screen, weighs 3.1kg. **Part code** A6VC-Q024P

HOTLIST **NOTEBOOK PC**

MV Mobeus MV010652

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £1,129 inc VAT

SUPPLIER **MV 08718 554668**
DETAILS www.go-mv.com

Although it's not quite an ultra-portable, MV's Mobeus MV010652 is an extremely powerful notebook that is still light enough to carry around. Its silver lid may be an acquired taste, but the black interior looks smart and the notebook feels durable. It has an excellent keyboard and is brimming with features, including Bluetooth and a DVD writer. Its reflective widescreen LCD produces saturated colours and very bright whites, but the touch pad is not particularly accurate.

The Mobeus's performance is probably its most impressive aspect. It achieved very high scores in the *Shopper* benchmarks and PCMark04



thanks to its 2GHz Intel Pentium M processor and gigabyte of system memory, and it has over three hours of battery life for travelling.

SPECIFICATIONS 2GHz Intel Pentium M 755, 1GB RAM, 60GB hard disk, integrated Intel 855GME graphics, DVD+/-RW DL, 12.1" widescreen LCD

BYTE SIZE!



Our round-up of the best new gadgets and software

SENNHEISER PXC 250


RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £71 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk

The *Shopper* office is pretty industrious, but we didn't realise how bustling it was until we tried these headphones. The PXC 250s have closed drivers, so simply putting them on takes out some background chatter. Their active noise-cancelling (see our *What's New* Audio FAQ on page 38) replaced the hum of labouring PCs and London traffic with blissful near-silence. They worked superbly to hush the air-conditioner on a modern train, and even tamed the Tube enough for quiet acoustic music to sound great.

Sennheiser supplies a case and adaptors for aircraft sound systems and ¼" sockets. The headphones are comfortable and lightweight, but require power from a couple of AAA batteries in a bulky case. This gripe aside, these are perfect headphones for travelling.

Simon Handby



SAITEK A-200

RATING ★★

PRICE £68 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.cclonline.com
DETAILS www.saitek.com/uk

These travel speakers are suitable for any portable media player, but Saitek has resisted the temptation to make them iPod white. They're quite large but look smart and distinctive. The A-200s come with a soft travel case and an AC adaptor, but also run from four AAA batteries.

To switch the on, you press a large section, which rises to form a bass-enhancing chamber. While this works well, bass response and definition fell off at very low frequencies. The speakers' mid-range response was a little harsh, but they are satisfyingly loud. The JBL On Tour speakers that we reviewed in last month's *What's New* are cheaper and sound better.

Simon Handby





CHOOSING A...

NOTEBOOK
COMPUTER

Follow our simple step-by-step advice to find the perfect notebook PC for your needs and your budget

1 The minimum specification of notebook we recommend, shown below in grey, is a good starting point when working out your ideal system. This is an average notebook that should cost around £700. It is not particularly powerful or, at 3.5kg, particularly portable. Mobile processors increase battery life and are becoming more common, even at this price.

2 Most people want a better notebook than the minimum – but what is your definition of better? Do you want something more powerful, or lighter and better-looking? Desktop replacement notebooks, which approach the power of a full-size PC, are necessarily large to house the extras. These usually include a desktop processor and larger battery to keep the whole lot running for any length of time.

3 If portability is your main priority, keep the spec modest (a Pentium M 1.7GHz with a 15" screen, say) but spend more. This will buy you an executive notebook with the kind of cutting-edge design required to miniaturise without compromising usability. Clever chassis, expensive batteries and the finest materials are prerequisites for superior ultra-portable notebooks.

4 There are features you can add to a notebook without piling on weight or reducing battery life. A 60GB, 80GB or 100GB hard disk and 1GB of RAM won't hurt. Another possibility is an external drive that you can carry with you or leave at home according to the nature of your trip. Some ultra-portables can attach to an optional docking station, which incorporates drives, ports and extra power for when you need it. It's the best of both worlds, but tends to be expensive.

5 If you're not swayed by ultra-portable chic, you can get a lot more for your money. Today's desktop replacements pile on the features but still keep the price well under £1,500. Alternatively, go for a balanced package: middling power and price in a reasonably portable package. Which one you pick depends on how much power and which features you need, so consider each in turn.

6 Notebooks run the same software as desktops, so our advice on the core specification is the same (see page 16). However, hard disks go up to only

100GB and even the best notebook graphics lag behind desktops.

7 DVD rewriter drives are standard and will allow you to burn CDs and DVDs on the move. If you want to watch movies, consider buying a notebook with a widescreen display.

8 A 1,024x768 screen is the entry level these days, but its size will depend on the notebook's purpose. Ultra-portables might have screens as small as 9". Widescreen displays have resolutions of 1,200x768 upwards but make for a bulkier notebook.

9 A modem and regular 10/100 Ethernet port are standard. Centrino notebooks also have wireless 802.11b or 802.11g networking (WiFi), and it's becoming increasingly popular on all models. IEEE-1394 (FireWire) and Bluetooth can be added to the default TV-out and USB2.0 ports. Memory card readers are extremely common, so check that your camera or MP3 player's format is supported.

10 Once you're happy with your spec, start to shortlist some models you can afford. Check the weight and battery life of each of them. If these aren't acceptable, you need to reconsider how much power and which features you really need.

FILL IN YOUR SPECS HERE

(Recommended minimum in grey)

PROCESSOR: Intel Celeron 2.66GHz

MEMORY: 512MB DDR

HARD DISK: 40GB

STORAGE: DVD rewriter

GRAPHICS: Integrated
(using system memory)

SCREEN: 1,024x768 LCD

EXTRAS: Wireless networking, FireWire

CONNECTORS: Three USB2, network,
modem

SOFTWARE: Windows XP Home Edition

WEIGHT: 3.5kg

BYTE
SIZE!

Our round-up of the best new gadgets and software

JABRA
SP500

RATING ★★

PRICE £59 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.expansys.com

DETAILS www.jabra.com



Jabra's SP500 is a Bluetooth speakerphone for the car or office. It comes with a cigarette lighter charger and an adjustable stand, so it can sit on your desk or stick to your windscreen.

Pairing the device with a phone is simple. The pairing button is hard to press, but we had no problem finding the SP500 in our phone's Bluetooth menu and adding it as a trusted device. Sound quality from the speaker is clear and loud, but the microphone is not up to scratch. The person on the other end of the line complained of a robotic-sounding voice that was hard to understand. Jabra's SP500 is easy to use, but the sound quality is poor considering its price.

Chris Finnamore

PNY
Outdoor Attaché 512MB

RATING ★★

PRICE £50

SUPPLIER PC World 08702 420444

DETAILS www.pcworld.co.uk

Flash memory drives are less prone to failure than floppy disks, but they are still susceptible to wear and tear. PNY's Outdoor Attaché is a toughened USB2 drive with 512MB of storage. The rubber exterior feels strong enough to withstand scratches and just about any kind of knock, while the cap forms a splash-proof seal. The protective case makes the drive too fat for closely spaced USB ports, but the drive comes with an extension cable to help it fit.

The Outdoor Attaché is not the fastest flash drive we have seen, but its performance is respectable: it took one minute and 51 seconds to fill its 480MB formatted capacity. This is a tough and well-made flash drive, but it's twice the price of most 512MB drives.

Chris Finnamore

